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Against Glamour Technology: Liberation of the Outlook for Contemporary Siberian Art

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The article is devoted to the problematics which in the cultural researches is associated with visual anthropology and esthetic theory of the contemporary art. Through the example of the contemporary Siberian artists' works the author demonstrates the way in which art forms opposition to the domineering technical discipline of the outlook and studies identity optics. The basic material for the research is exhibition project "The United States of Siberia" (2012-2013), wherein, according to the author, artists form the optics of Siberian identity.

Keywords: contemporary art, visual anthropology, identity optics, poor art, pop art.

From cave paintings to Black Square, from ancient mimetic sculptures to abstract installations art has always formed the outlook disposition that created the optics defining the parameters of cultural identity. Whether it refers the Egyptian "Book of the Dead" or Orthodox icon, Hollywood cinema or paintings of the Russian Wanderers, in all the cases we are dealing not only with images, but with the cultural positioning of the outlooks of this culture's representative. An artist invites us not only meet the image-bearing and / or narrative side of works of art. An artist lures us to a point from which we can see better and in which the look and meaning as well as artistic sign and cultural value harmonize.

This effect is well illustrated, for example, in the studies by Marshall McLuhan, where he demonstrates that the visual conventions

of cinema (both feature and documentary) – a cut, the transition of narration through scene changes, etc. are "natural" only for a Westerner accustomed to cinematic conventions. For those who watch a film for the first time (for example nonliterate tribes), this language is unintelligible [1, 2]. In the works of representatives of critical theory, we also find the study of this problematics as exemplified in cinema. Walter Benjamin discovers formation of outlook dispositions in its "mechanization" which is made by the technical apparatus of filming [3]. H. Marcuse and M. Horkheimer analyze the effect of doubling reality due to the "natural" transition of images from the cinema screen into the context of everyday life [4].

But what can we say about contemporary art? Doesn't it, on the contrary, attempt to set

us free from the slavery of the technologically imposed outlook? Doesn't it open up new horizons and opportunities to experiment with different optics and methods of identification? Doesn't it fulfill the noble task of saving us from the optics of consumer identity and its technological discipline?

We'll consider this question through one of the remarkable examples in contemporary Russian art – exhibition project of 2012-2013, entitled “The United States of Siberia.” The project was prepared by the Siberian Center for Contemporary Art (Novosibirsk) and the Siberian Branch of the National Center for Contemporary Art (Tomsk) (curator – Vyacheslav Mizin, “Blue Noses” art-group). For brevity in the further work we will use the initials of the exhibition project – the USS.

As befits a contemporary art exhibition “The United States of Siberia” caused quite a lot of diverse readings and questions among critics to measure the depth and event scope of the project. What art event did V. Mizin succeed and fail as a curator? Hold a regular celebration in the street of “Russian Povera”? Study and discover interesting facets of Siberian identity? Introduce the new artistic phenomenon to the world – contemporary Siberian art and artists' brotherhood? Or declare a new version of Siberian separatism manifesto? Make a protest political action in the painfully familiar “anti-Russian” spirit? Or maybe vice versa – the USS suddenly appeared as an apology of Russian patriotism and chauvinism through the Siberians's eyes? Perhaps the curator simply contrived to give a set of ironic comics based on pop culture for contemporary art? For what purpose? Quite thought over regional marketing by the means of contemporary art. On the other hand, abstracting from the cynical marketing, in the collected works such a noble idea of psychotherapeutic impact on the public, brainwashed by mass culture and political

propaganda is represented. Did the curator conceive to cure us?

Of course, exposure to the exhibition rather leaves us puzzled in interrogative bewilderment than gives answers and dots the i's. Well, the more interesting is the attempt to unravel the tangle of questions and discourses that the contemporary artists, the inhabitants of the mythical art republic of the United States of Siberia, puzzle us with, and understand the optics of Siberian identity that they offer.

Clear outlook or at the festival of “Russian Povera”

In the context of contemporary art “The United States of Siberia” can be placed in line with the other two historical exhibitions – “Arte Povera in Space” (1967, Genoa, curator J. Chelant) and “Russian Povera” (2008, Perm, curator M. Guelman). They are united by the same art motifs: an appeal to the “poor” means of expression (simple, ordinary, readily available materials), a protest against glamor and elitism of art – everything stinking rich. One of the heroes of the 1967 exhibition and 1960-70s arte povera (poor art in the Italian original) – Jannis Kounellis – used earth, fire, animals, doors, bags, window frames, etc. in his works [5]. Valery Koshlyakov – the participant of 2008 Perm Exhibition – creates his work from pieces of cardboard, adhesive tape and stumbled across debris, producing art-on-release – ephemeral art trash (one of the educational projects of the USS curator V. Mizin was once called – “anyhow art”).

“Arte Povera” in all its diversity can hardly be called an aesthetic program that unites artists (especially in the case of “Russian Povera”). Rather, it is a common intuition, collective idea for the aesthetics of contemporary art. It sends us to the ready made objects. Yes, as well as to conceptualism, Russian avant-garde of the early

20th century and to the Soviet non-conformism and American Pop Art. However, “Povera” is certainly a claim to a specific optics. Optics of clear and simple outlook where the concept shines through uncomplicated poor material.

The USS is permeated with the spirit of “Russian Povera”. And not only because the curator of a project and his creativity as creativity of an artist is associated with this aesthetic (suffice it to recall “Kitchen Suprematism” by “Blue Noses” group). And of course, not only because the exhibition was actively promoted by “Cultural Alliance” of the same Marat Guelman. Simply, a lot of works exhibited at the USS are strong and interesting for this aesthetic.

It all starts with the simplest and most trivial, ordinary and improvised. Novosibirsk artist Sergei Bespamyatnykh, for example, praised the courage and greatness of the political leaders hostile to the USA – Hugo Chavez, Saddam Hussein, Ho Chi Minh and others, using glued to canvas clippings from newspapers and magazines (series “They Fought for the Homeland”). Olympic women’s skates by Vasily Slonov (from the series “Welcome to Sochi 2014”) partly quote the work by Alexander Brodsky “Gorky Park” (1997) introduced in Perm in 2008, and develop, together with Slonov’s axes decorated by Olympic (and not only Olympic) symbols and slogans, dadaism experiments ready made. Disposition of the outlook begins with a simple and painfully familiar thing, which gains an unexpected status of an artistic sign.

In the case of axes, Slonov demonstrates the astonishing conceptual force of arte povera. The case is that conceptualism allows an artist to neglect the traditional means of expression – a brush and paints, marble and bronze, etc. – in favor of anything that can serve as a form of artistic expression [6]. And here is the real series of two dozen of axes included in a symbolic play around Sochi Olympics: an axe as a symbol of

strength and rebellion (though peacefully stuck in a plank), as a symbol of creative labour, as a symbol of Russian patriarchy, primitiveness and anti-symbol of modernization. On the top of all that, Slonov on purpose ironically adds some glamour to his axes using the Olympic symbols and slogans, turning them into proud glamour of national images of sports victory celebrations. Thereby he also establishes “povera” in opposition to rich and glamorous, and debunks the empty glossy shine of wealthy elite culture.

Konstantin Eremenko done without art objects in the spirit of ready made. But its scenic comics are poor in their way. He uses aerographics – a tool of street artlike vandalism and car repair shops that offer a graphical tuning of cars for the owners with aesthetic would-be. Another side of the “povera” – poverty as ontology and illusion of existence is revealed in Eremenko’s works. Trying to disperse melancholy of provincial grandeur of native Novosibirsk, the artist demonstrates the poverty of life without myth and meaning. It is better to be in any illusion, like a story about a concert of “The Queen” during construction of the underground or evacuation of the idols of Soviet children – Khrusha and Stepashka into the Siberian city than live in a meaningless emptiness of the vast geographical expanses of Siberia.

“Povera” as a concept is also represented in V. Slonov’s works. But it is represented in a totally different meaning, similar to the meaning that became a symbol of creativity for another hero of the exhibition in Perm – Nikolai Polissky. “Povera” is simple, natural and present – as an axe and a material it processes. “Povera” reflects and contains something Russian, natural, real – simple and great, rude and miserable, degraded and surviving, sincere and false. Poverty is not shameful, but specific being, full of courage and tragical anti-pathos. As a result, optics of “poor”



Fig. 1 K. Eremenko “Khrusha and Stepashka in evacuation”. Novosibirsk. 1942

things turns into the disposition of studying the new meanings. The next step is identification with the disposition.

Siberian pop-art

Aesthetics of “povera” is close to the philosophy of pop art. It is no coincidence that the main work of the USS which is entitled precisely the same “The United States of Siberia” and performed by the author – Omsk artist Damir Muratov as a white stripes flag of the Siberian island of freedom, quotes the most important work of pop art – “Flag” by Jasper Johns. Johns brilliantly deconstructs the structure of the artistic sign, demonstrating the difficulty of distinguishing between the canvas with colored stripes and stars and the national symbol – the Star-Spangled Banner [7]. It is absolutely not clear where the boundary of the sign is. Muratov develops this method, demonstrating the difficulty in distinguishing between the snowflakes and stripes and a symbol of (non)existing (?) republic (or the island of freedom, as he would call it later).

“Povera” and pop art are definitely not only brought together by anti-aesthetic in the sense of denying of the dominant idea of beauty and harmony in art, but also a critical attitude regarding the elite and mass culture. Pop art of the 1960s in the United States is characterized by

criticizing the society of mass consumption and demonstration of the hopelessness for art, which arises in a world where everything is dissolved in commodity-money relations. High and low inevitably change places as high becomes a commodity, and goods and money become the main value. That is why the images of pop art in the works by R. Lichtenstein, A. Warhol, T. Wesselmann and J. Johns exploit “low” genres and objects – posters and photographs, comics, consumer products, newspapers, etc. The well-known tactics is to borrow the means from an enemy and use them against him [8]. The artists from the USS continue this game in their own way.

Damir Muratov and Vasily Slonov used – absolutely in the spirit of Andy Warhol – advertising poster format and series of posting in several rows (because the repetition compulsion is the basis of advertising impact). What came off in the end was neither poster no painting, but the desired provocative artistic gesture, around which the logic of contemporary art is formed. Slonov invites us to the Olympics and as if advertises typically Russian socio-political colour of sports mega-event. Under the brand “Che” Muratov “sells” politicians, writers, poets and cartoon characters.

Comics became the genre basis for the works by Nikolai Kopeikin and Konstantin Eremenko.



Fig. 2. D. Muratov “Flag of the United States of Siberia”

Kopeikin (who is probably not a very Siberian artist from all the Brotherhood of the USS as he lives and works in St. Petersburg for a long time) presented touching, sentimental and ironic “serial” about an elephant who was brought to Russia for the Emperor Peter I at the beginning of the 18th century. The story that the Emperor several times tried to bring the exotic animal to Petersburg and eventually he got it (he received elephant as a gift from Shah Hussain) finds a lot of evidence. One can only wonder what happened to this animal. Nikolai Kopeikin tries to spark interest to the definitely undervalued story from Russian history, trying to suppose what the fate of the first Russian elephant would be. Here it is sitting under a birch tree on the river bank feeling sad about its homeland. And here it is drinking with the sailors. And here its offsprings came as plumbers to a man who looks like Korney Chukovsky: “Who is speaking? The elephant!”. Is the forgotten chapter of Russian history has finally returned to the public?

One of the central themes of pop-art is a mixture of reality and images of mass culture. Due to the constant influence of the media, advertising and consumer wealth a modern man finds himself in a world where the boundaries between reality of the material world and the world of images from the television screen are erased. If reality no longer exists or it is extremely difficult to find

it, it loses its meaning – not for the first time in history – and realism in art. Siberian pop artists certainly could not evade this theme.

Damir Muratov in a series of works “If they were born in Siberia” used the effects in the spirit of socialist realism to feature pop stars’ biography. Elvis Presley would certainly become an accordion player – a favorite of rural beauties. And Michael Jackson would become a shepherd. In the mythology of “The United States of Siberia” art republic simplicity of rural life and vast expanses of Siberia quite naturally and hospitably place alternative biographies of the distant western idols. What is this? Melancholy for unattainable pop idols in the vast Siberian depth of the country? Overthrow of the false idols and their return to the mortal earth? Or an offer for a refuge in the world of “poor” and real for those who lost their own reality and lost themselves in the media environment?

Nikolai Kopeikin develops this theme in his own way. In the “epic canvas” “War of the Worlds”, where he ironically depicts great battle scenes of classical painting and Russian collective portraits by Ilya Glazunov, he portrayed the battle of the heroes of Russian (Soviet) and American cartoons. Shrek and Crocodile Gena, Cheburashka and Mickey Mouse, cat Tom and the Wolf from “Ну, погоди!” clashed in the battle. There are a lot of soldiers in both armies.



Fig. 3. V. Slonov from the series «Welcome to Sochi 2014»

Outcome of the battle is unknown. However it is not important. Another meaningful leitmotif of creativity of the USSR brotherhood artists is much more important.

Optics and policy of Siberian identity

When we discuss contemporary art we usually mention the fact that an artist explores something, looking for an answer to a question or trying to put this question in the clearest and the most precise form. What do the artists from the USSR explore? We could answer this question in the following way: they explore the contemporary Siberian mythology, conducting experiments on its formation.

The first part of the experiment is devoted to America – the present day United States. The USA became the starting point for the artists, but not the terminal point. Muratov borrows American flag and inhabits Siberia with celebrated migrants (“If they were born in Siberia”). Slonov gets rid of “the pernicious influence of the West”, placing the new symbol of Siberian power on the Siberian

steel kokoshnik – a bear plunges Mickey Mouse in the sexual act. Kopeikin forms an army from the American cartoon pop heroes making it fight with the victorious army of the Russian cartoon heroes. Sergei Bepamyatnykh praises of all those “great political leaders” who openly opposed the USA – Ho Chi Minh, Saddam Hussein, Hugo Chavez and others – on the board (wall or alley) of fame.

The second part of the experiment on studying and formation of the USSR mythology is devoted to history. Few people know that the scanty (though obviously just) patriotic slogan about the increasing the power of Russia with Siberia is not the most flattering and interesting myth about the Siberian land as a part of Russia. The very phrase “the United States of Siberia” was definitely borrowed by the artists from the political history and movements of Siberian separatists (the so-called Siberian regionalism), which, in fact, achieved recognition of the colonial status of Siberia, struggled for self-determination of its indigenous peoples and advocated for its separation from Russia,



Fig 4. D. Muratov from the series «If they were born in Siberia»

intending to create a kind of resemblance to the United States of America.

Indeed, is there a positive, attractive and interesting myth about Siberia except the image of vast expanses of uninhabited wilderness, harsh and stuck in the unknown past Siberians or bottomless raw materials appendage of the Moscow kingdom? Do the inhabitants this vast territory live with this sensation?

Siberian regionalism in the 19th century tried to create utopian vision of the future of the Siberian region, which in the West is traditionally perceived apart from the vast territory of Russia. Contemporary Siberian artists create the utopian art republic “The United States of Siberia” – a self-portrait of Siberia as an utopian land (Muratov) thus trying to understand / create mythology of the contemporary Siberia. And it is not in the works but in the fact what outlooks, optics, states and feelings these activities should provoke / form in a viewer.

In Vasily Slonov’s work we can find disposition of the Siberian outlook that combines a bit malicious humor, rude irony and brutal mockery, global distrust to the official symbols and officialdom – an outlook of disbelief that fast and fun sees through any kind of duplicity and showing off. The outlook that poses humorous challenge to the seaside Krasnodar glamour

“Sochi-2014” from the point of view of simplicity and austerity of Krasnoyarsk izba.

Konstantin Eremenko stylized his aerography as old photos and mocking the power of this “document” in the “history” of Novosibirsk, mocks the longing for a big pop-cultural myth about Siberia creating it spontaneously. From the point of his ironic-optimistic point of view everything is possible in Siberia – it is necessary to start the creative machine which invents new myths, and then cheerfully and a little bit angry (in Slonov’s manner) debunk all this nonsense. Sergey Bepamyatnykh in his works plays upon the sensation of cult of the ancient Siberian land in the similar way.

This time members of the “Blue Noses” art group decided to soar up to the level of large-scale generalizations – probably trying to reach the Siberian philosophical outlook and represented Siberian region as a battleground of the old and the new, remains of epic bogatyr Rus (in the image of bogatyr) and contemporary Russia on the fateful path of modernization (in the form of suprematist objects by Malevich). The outcome of this battle in Siberia (in techno parks, Academic towns, universities, churches, etc.) will determine the future of 1/6 of the land.

Thus, according to the version of the residents of “The United States of Siberia” art republic,

modern Siberian identity has a special mixture of crude and humorous, dark and cheerful outlook on life, aggressive and lively disengagement with the dominance of American pop culture, distancing itself from the pop national glamor and officialdom, rediscovering of Siberian as a poor cultural concept, involving, in particular, a considerable distance from the national cultural sensitivity in any of its versions. It is the very optics the contemporary Siberian artists seduce us into.

The USS mythic art republic itself is an object of contemporary art that “hangs out in the minds”, space and time (even despite the fact that its residence was temporarily located near Novosibirsk). Its founders – no less mythical artistic brotherhood – invite us into the world of provocative questions, exploring and developing cultural symbols, endless citation of artistic tradition, pop culture and politics. Crossing geographical boundaries – at least, a kind of unified Siberia is also not more than mythogeography – the adepts of contemporary Siberian art start the work with the boundaries of concepts, stereotypes, symbols and images (as Slonov does in his “Olympic” posters, psychoanalytically deconstructing social and political context of the Olympics with the help of graphic symbols). This is the strategy of contemporary art as “the factories of senses” – to check the strength of the boundaries of norms, values, concepts and symbols. But who does this factory work in with? After all, the question of identity is always a political issue.

Indeed, from the very beginning “Russian Povera” was not simply an aesthetic concept, but one of the central elements of cultural branding of the Perm region (we leave aside the

question of how successful this project was). The “Cultural Alliance” program by Marat Gelman, within the framework of which the USS gained international and domestic fame is also largely focused on mobilization of the regional cultural resources for commercial and political purposes (the other question is how viable it was). Meanwhile exhibition project “The United States of Siberia” gradually turns into a regional brand of contemporary art of Siberia and the brand of several organizations – the Siberian Center for Contemporary Art (Novosibirsk), the Foundation for Support of Contemporary Art “Siberia” and Siberian Branch of the National Center for Contemporary Art (Tomsk). Which of the geographical, administrative or commercial Siberian subjects will contribute to further promotion of the brand?

One can only speculate. In any case, political and marketing cynicism is another test for endurance and viability of curatorial initiative of the USS – bright, contemporary, multi-layered, resonant, a little bit drunk, frivolous and brutal.

In conclusion I would like to go back to the question that was raised at the beginning of this article. As we can see from the proposed analysis, contemporary artists deftly and naturally use identity optics through outlook disposition formation. On the one hand, they really tend to destroy and deconstruct the obsessive dispositions of pop culture, offering to problematize them in ironic and funny way. On the other hand, they invite us to try different disposition – their version of Siberian identity. But in the end they try to make us the followers of regional cultural marketing – in other words, return us to the place they tried to save us from – to the optics of consumer, but this time much more sophisticated.

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Против технологического гламура: освобождение взгляда в современном искусстве Сибири

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Статья посвящена проблематике, которую в культурных исследованиях ассоциируют с визуальной антропологией и эстетической теорией современного искусства. На примере творчества современных сибирских художников автор показывает, как искусство формирует оппозицию доминирующей технологической дисциплине взгляда и исследует оптику идентичности. Основным материалом для статьи послужил выставочный проект «Соединенные штаты Сибири» (2012-2013), в котором, по мнению автора, художники формируют оптику сибирской идентичности.

Ключевые слова: современное искусство, визуальная антропология, оптика идентичности, бедное искусство, поп-арт.
